RESEARCH ARTICLE

A STRANGER FRIEND: A NETNOGRAPHIC LOOK AT PARASOCIAL INTERACTION AND LISTENER GRATIFICATIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH PODCASTS

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Received: 19.06.2026 - Accepted: 12.10.2026

Ataç, T. (2026). A stranger friend: A netnographic look at parasocial interaction and listener gratifications in mental health podcasts. *Etkileşim*, 18, 138-165. https://doi.org/10.32739/etkilesim.2026.9.18.366

This study complies with research and publication ethics.

Abstract

This study examines gratifications and parasocial interaction among mental health podcast listeners in Türkiye. Using a netnographic approach, 454 of 803 comments on the top 15 such podcasts on *Apple Podcasts* were analysed through thematic content analysis. Drawing on four classical gratification categories, social integrative gratification was widened into a parasocial and social category. Parasocial and social gratification accounts for 45.2%, and friendship alone for 28.0%. Cognitive (21.8%), emotional (17.6%), and escape and comfort (10.4%) follow. Therapeutic substitution, identified inductively, accounts for 5.1%, positioning the podcast as a substitute for therapy, a compensation for access barriers, or a solitary practice. The pattern needs support from broader studies. Listeners form a strong parasocial bond with hosts, expressed through elements of closeness such as conversational register, shared laughter, voice, and terms of address.

Keywords: podcast, mental health, parasocial interaction, uses and gratifications, netnography.

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

YABANCI BİR ARKADAŞ: RUH SAĞLIĞI PODCASTLERİNDE PARASOSYAL ETKİLEŞİM VE DİNLEYİCİ DOYUMLARI ÜZERİNE NETNOGRAFİK BİR BAKIŞ

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Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki ruh sağlığı podcast dinleyicilerinin doyumlarını ve parasosyal etkileşimini incelemektedir. Netnografik bir yaklaşımla *Apple Podcasts*'teki en popüler 15 podcast'e ait 803 yorumdan 454'ü tematik içerik analiziyle incelenmiştir. Dört klasik doyum kategorisinden yararlanılarak sosyal bütünleştirici doyum, parasosyal ve sosyal doyum kategorisine genişletilmiştir. Parasosyal ve sosyal doyum çerçevenin %45,2'sini, dostluk ise tek başına %28,0'ını oluşturmaktadır. Bunu bilişsel (%21,8), duygusal (%17,6) ve kaçış ve rahatlık (%10,4) izlemektedir. Tümevarımsal olarak belirlenen terapötik ikame yorumların %5,1'ini oluşturmakta, podcast'i terapinin yerine, erişim engelinin telafisi ya da bireysel bir iyileşme pratiği olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Bu örüntü daha geniş çalışmalarla desteklenmelidir. Dinleyiciler sunucularla güçlü bir parasosyal ilişki kurmakta, bunu sohbet kipi, birlikte gülme, ses ve tanıdık hitabı gibi yakınlık unsurlarıyla dile getirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: podcast, ruh sağlığı, parasosyal etkileşim, kullanımlar ve doyumlar, netnografi.

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Introduction

The Cambridge Dictionary's choice of 'parasocial' as its Word of the Year for 2025 (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025) shows how important digital media is in everyday relationships today. First coined by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe the one-way bond television viewers form with on-screen personalities, this term has become a common concept in the daily lives of millions. Today, it also describes the bonds people form with AI chatbots, social media personalities, *YouTube* content creators, and podcast hosts.

One format where this is most evident is the podcast. According to Edison Research's (2024) *Infinite Dial* study, 67% of Americans aged 12 and older have listened to a podcast. Of these, 47% listen monthly, while 34% listen weekly. Podcasts' share of daily audio content has risen from 2% in 2014 to 11% in 2024, making them a media platform that competes with music and radio. In Türkiye, over 20,000 Turkish-language podcasts reached approximately 490,000 listeners in 2024 (Poddict, 2024). Approximately three-quarters of listeners are between the ages of 18 and 44 (Mobile Marketing Association Türkiye, 2022), and mental health and personal development podcasts consistently rank among the top spots on *Apple Podcasts*' Türkiye charts.

The rise of mental health podcasts is linked not only to consumption but also to social conditions. Drawing on data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, Çebi Karaaslan et al. (2024) identified the primary barriers to seeking psychological support as financial constraints, distrust of professionals, fear of stigma, shame, family pressure, and concerns about treatment. Under these conditions, individuals are turning to alternative sources, and mental health podcasts are playing a significant role in this regard. A listener who opens a podcast becomes both a listener and an individual seeking support.

This synchronicity lies at the intersection of three traditions. Katz, Blumler, et al.'s (1973) 'uses and gratifications' approach argues that audiences are active and purposeful and that they interact with content based on their needs. Horton and Wohl's (1956) parasocial interaction theory describes the emotional bond formed with the presenter as a 'familiar stranger' relationship. Hoffner and Bond's (2022) synthesis shows that parasocial relationships significantly affect mental health and well-being. Together, these theories frame the role of mental health podcasts in listeners' daily lives.

A fourth concept reinforces this framework. While Couldry and Hepp's (2017) approach to mediatisation argues that everyday reality is mediated through media infrastructure and that social practices are restructured through this infrastructure, Lupton (2018) extends this to the health sector, demonstrating that digital health technologies redefine the concepts of 'what health is' and 'who receives care.' Thus, mental health podcasts have become a platform for media-mediated care sought alongside or in place of professional support. While Schlütz and Hedder (2021) show that podcasts concentrate intimacy in the voice, Carrotte et al. (2025) report promising effects of pod-

cast interventions on awareness and stigma.

However, qualitative studies on how Turkish listeners experience mental health podcasts remain limited. Most existing studies in Western contexts rely on surveys or experiments that indirectly access listener discourse. This study adopts a netnographic approach to provide a qualitative, comment-based perspective in the Turkish context, using *Apple Podcasts* comments (which listeners spontaneously and reflexively generate about their own media use) independent of the directive framework of survey questions.

The study addresses three questions. First, which gratification categories emerge in Turkish mental health podcast listeners' comments? Second, to what extent and in what forms does parasocial interaction occur? Third, how is the relationship between media consumption and mental health practices established? The study adopts four classic gratification categories as a pre-analytical framework. During the analysis, a limited number of comments comparing the podcast to professional support led to the identification of a fifth, inductive category: therapeutic substitution (K5). The study therefore contributes on three fronts. Methodologically, it shows that comments listeners generate on their own initiative can serve as a viable source for gratification research in a field dominated by surveys. Theoretically, it expands the social integrative category into a parasocial and social gratification category (K3) and identifies therapeutic substitution (K5) as an inductive addition. Contextually, it documents how these patterns take shape in Türkiye, where stigma and barriers to professional support shape help-seeking. The remaining sections discuss the literature, the netnographic method, findings and contributions, limitations, and future directions.

Theoretical Framework and Literature

The uses and gratifications approach

The uses and gratifications approach is one of the most established frameworks for analysing audience behaviour in mass communication. The core premise of this approach shifts the focus from 'what the media does to the audience' to 'how the audience uses the media' (Katz, Blumler, et al.'s 1973, p. 510). This marks a paradigm shift from a passive audience model to an active, selective audience model that chooses media based on its needs.

This approach has roots in 1940s radio research. Herzog's (1944) study of daytime soap opera listeners (part of Lazarsfeld and Stanton's (1944) Radio Research Project) empirically demonstrated that audiences derive different forms of gratification from the media and identified three of them: emotional relief, wish fulfilment, and learning (Herzog, 1944, p. 25). The podcast, a digital extension of audio media, continues these patterns of emotional and cognitive gratification.

This approach is based on five assumptions (Katz, Blumler, et al.'s 1973, pp. 511-512): the audience is active and purposeful, relates their needs to media choices, compares media with other sources, can articulate their motivations, and the value of media content can only be assessed through audience orientations. By utilising user-generated comments, this study directly addresses the fourth assumption (that the audience's discourse reflects their own media usage).

Blumler and Katz's (1974) compilation expanded the approach's gratification map. Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas's (1973) typology groups needs into cognitive, emotional, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension reduction. Within this study's framework, cognitive (K1) and emotional (K2) gratification align with the typology. Escape and comfort (K4) align with tension reduction. The need for social integration has been expanded to include the parasocial and social gratification (K3) category through Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction, for in a mental health podcast, the need to form social bonds and parasocial closeness toward the host are inseparably intertwined. The personal integrative need, which has no clear counterpart in listener discourse, has been excluded from the study.

Critics have pointed out its limitations: Elliott (1974, p. 249) warned that this approach's individualistic, functionalist view of the audience neglects social and class conditions. Blumler (1979, p. 10), however, treated it not as a theory but as a research framework. Accordingly, this study treats the deductive framework as a flexible map open to revision and incorporates K5 (Therapeutic Substitution), which emerges through induction.

Ruggiero (2000) argued that this approach suits the internet and interactive platforms and that future models must address interaction, move away from massification, and incorporate asynchrony as embodied by podcasts. In Turkish research, Gökler (2025) identified motivations such as entertainment, escapism, friendship, personal development, and knowledge. Sine Nazlı and Değer (2023), meanwhile, examined the transition from radio to podcasts. This study builds on these works by focusing on parasocial interaction, using user-generated comments, and examining mental health podcasts.

Podcast studies: Gratifications and parasocial bonds

Research applying this framework to podcasts has developed along two lines. The first documents what listeners seek. Perks and Turner (2019) identified the displacement of other media, customisable listening, and multitasking as emerging gratifications. They extended the existing categories of companionship and interaction by tracing how parasocial relationships form during listening. Perks et al. (2019) subsequently developed a podcast gratifications scale, and Chan-Olmsted and Wang (2022) mapped consumption motives across a national sample. Tobin and Guadagno (2022) approached the question from a dispositional perspective. They reported that time spent listening

was not associated with relatedness or meaning, although parasocial relationships and social engagement were linked to positive outcomes. In Turkish research, Özkök Şişman and Tosun (2022) measured perceived gratification among podcast users. They identified four dimensions, namely education and entertainment, storytelling, social participation, and multitasking, while Bulut (2022) examined podcasting as a form of personal narrative through interviews with producers and listeners. Neither study isolates a relational dimension, and none of the work above addresses mental health content.

A second line asks why the podcast form produces such bonds. Zuraikat (2020) attributes the phenomenon to the medium itself, arguing that its conversational register and its availability during ordinary activities position the listener inside the exchange rather than outside it. Scherer and Cohen (2025) specify a mechanism, reporting that mobility strengthens parasocial relationships indirectly through narrative transportation, an effect that increases with multitasking. Maloney Yorganci and McMurtry (2025) approach the question from the listener's side and identify seven features through which hosts are perceived as authentic, namely ordinariness, immediacy, similarity, freedom, spontaneity, imperfection, and confession. They further observe that these features operate along two routes, either producing a sense of knowing the host or producing a sense of friendship with the host. Vilceanu (2025) analysed more than twelve thousand listener reviews of two long-running podcasts and found the host to be the anchor of intimacy and trust, with changes to the host or format prompting nostalgic reassessment among listeners.

Media and parasocial interaction

Parasocial interaction is a one-way yet emotionally intimate bond that a viewer forms with a media personality. Horton and Wohl (1956) observed that television personalities address viewers as if speaking directly to them and that viewers respond as if in a reciprocal relationship, thereby developing loyalty, trust, and closeness. They termed this "distant intimacy" / "distant closeness" and defined the media personality as a 'familiar stranger' (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215), explaining how a viewer forms a bond with someone they do not know.

Parasocial interaction is increasingly viewed not as a single phenomenon but as a process of varying intensity. Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) conceptualise the phenomenon as a developmental process: the viewer first takes an interest, then makes cognitive and emotional investments through increased exposure, and finally establishes a sustainable bond. The four K3 sub-dimensions of this study align with this: recognition (K3.1) with the initial interaction, friendship (K3.2) and not feeling alone (K3.3) with the deepening of the bond, and trust and loyalty (K3.4) with the sustainable stage.

Recent studies indicate that parasocial interaction affects viewers' mental health and well-being. Hoffner and Bond's (2022) review highlights its bidirectional impact: parasocial relationships can strengthen belonging, support development, and reduce stigmatisation, but they can also harm mental health through negative self-comparisons.

The strongest evidence regarding positive effects comes from an experiment by Lotun et al. (2022). This experiment demonstrated that forming a parasocial bond with a *YouTube* content creator who has mental health issues significantly reduced mental health-related biases and intergroup anxiety. Thus, parasocial relationships in digital media are not merely emotional bonds but a form of communication that can transform views on mental health, supporting this study's therapeutic substitution (K5) category.

Parasocial interaction in podcasts has attracted growing scholarly attention, yet the available evidence still rests largely on elicited data. The most comprehensive study, a survey of 804 German listeners conducted by Schlütz and Hedder (2021), showed that audio media supports parasocial relationships that influence attitudes and behaviours. The authors argue that sound alone creates intimacy; therefore, the podcast connection is more intimate than that of television. This is because listeners typically listen to the host's voice through headphones in personal spaces, without visual stimuli.

Özkan Sev and Vural (2024) examined this potential in the Turkish context through a mixed-methods design. In the first phase, they measured listeners' parasocial interaction levels with a parasocial interaction scale and tested whether demographic characteristics and listening habits produced significant differences. In the second phase, they analysed semi-structured interviews using inductive content analysis. Both phases converged on the same result. Parasocial interaction occurs through podcasts, and listeners consider the host's mode of address, style, and demeanour to be the most important factors. The authors attribute this to the characteristics of the medium itself, arguing that the everyday language and conversational register of podcasts make the listener feel part of a conversation, that podcasts accompany listeners during their ordinary activities, and that the intimacy of a voice speaking close to the ear renders the medium particularly suited to parasocial engagement. They therefore frame podcast listening as a mediated relationship rather than a merely technical form of consumption and describe parasocial interaction as an illusion of friendship.

Two features of that study locate the contribution of the present study. First, its data were produced in response to a scale and an interview schedule. The comments analysed here were generated spontaneously by listeners and addressed to the host rather than a researcher, allowing the relational dimension to be observed in the terms the listeners themselves choose. Second, its scope is the podcast medium in general, whereas the present study asks what happens when the content is mental health. The findings reported below indicate that under this condition the relational dimension does not merely accompany informational and emotional gratification but takes precedence over it, which is why the social integrative category required expansion into a parasocial and social gratification category (K3).

The cultural prominence of this concept peaked when the *Cambridge Dictionary* selected 'parasocial' as its 2025 Word of the Year, defining it as the bond a person feels with an unknown celebrity, a character, or an AI (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). This definition reflects just how intensely one-way connections are now being produced in podcasts, social media, and AI chatbots.

Thus, parasocial interaction forms the foundation of the patterns of parasocial and social gratification (K3) described in the literature ranging from Horton and Wohl (1956) to Tukachinsky and Stever (2019), Hoffner and Bond (2022), Lotun et al. (2022), and Schlütz and Hedder (2021).

Mental health content

In today's societies, the search for mental health information and support is becoming increasingly mediatised, as individuals turn not only to experts but also to *YouTube* videos, social media, and podcasts to discover meaning regarding anxiety, depression, trauma, and relationships. This situation points to a communication ecology alongside the face-to-face therapeutic relationship.

This ecosystem can be examined through the concept of mediatisation. Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue that everyday reality is becoming mediatised and that the media serves as an infrastructure that shapes practices. From this perspective, mental health practice becomes a mediated form of self-care shaped by daily media use. Lupton (2018) argues that digital health technologies redefine what health is and who has access to care, while simultaneously shifting responsibility onto individuals. Here, the K5 discourse, which positions the podcast as a personal healing practice, aligns with Lupton's concept of digital self-care.

A survey by Carrotte et al. (2023) of 629 listeners found that mental health podcast listeners exhibit less stigmatising attitudes and greater knowledge. Additionally, their 2025 review of 20 studies reported promising effects on mindfulness, body image, and stigma. However, these findings are limited by self-reported data and convenience samples.

In Türkiye, this literature should be interpreted within the context of the country's mental health service structure and stigma. In a study conducted by Özmen et al. (2004) with 707 participants in Istanbul, a distinct negative attitude toward depression was identified: approximately half of the participants viewed people with depression as dangerous, more than half stated they would not marry such a person, and nearly half indicated they would not rent an apartment to them (Özmen et al., 2004, p. 1013). Similarly, Utz et al. (2019) found that framing issues as mental illnesses increases social distance. This type of stigma helps explain the preference for media-mediated sources: listening with headphones in a private space is an invisible practice that overcomes fears of stigma, making podcasts a particularly effective media-mediat-

ed space for recovery in Türkiye.

Bilican (2013, p. 49) identified the primary barriers to seeking help among Turkish university students as stigma, distrust of professionals, a desire for self-reliance, and limited knowledge, noting that students view support as a last resort. Çebi Karaaslan et al.'s (2024) analysis of data from the Türkiye Health Survey demonstrates that these barriers persist structurally, explains the strong listener base of mental health podcasts, and highlights the theoretical need for K5.

At the intersection of parasocial interaction and mental health interventions, the findings of Lotun et al. (2022) bridge K3 and K5: parasocial bonds foster closeness and may reduce biases regarding mental health. This aligns with this study's co-coding of friendship (K3.2) with K5. Therefore, the study argues that mental health podcasts create a space for media-mediated care. Couldry and Hepp (2017) provide the social context, Lupton (2018) the autonomy-responsibility paradox, Carrotte et al. (2023, 2025) evidence on reducing stigma, and Lotun et al. (2022) the parasocial mechanism.

Method

Research design

This study used a netnographic design to examine usage, gratification, and parasocial interaction among mental health podcast listeners in Türkiye. Netnography (Kozinets, 2002, 2010, 2020) adapts the ethnographic method to online communities, enabling the systematic observation and content analysis of user-generated texts.

Kozinets (2015, 2020) defines four types of netnography: symbolic (observational analysis of user discourse), digital (analysis of online traces and platform data), humanistic (the researcher's deep participation), and autonetnography (reflective analysis of the researcher's own experience) (Kozinets, 2015, 2020; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). This study falls between symbolic and digital netnography: *Apple Podcasts* comments were treated as a public digital archive examined from an observational distance, without the researcher's participation, interaction, or commentary (Kozinets, 2015, 2020). Because the comments were not produced for a researcher, this design makes visible the terms listeners use to describe the relationship while limiting the analysis to what they chose to write publicly.

Three reasons motivate this choice. First, the parasocial bond can be observed in its natural setting through spontaneous comments that the researcher's participation would disrupt. Second, this method provides direct access to listener discourse with minimal intervention. Third, platform comments constitute a real-time archive of the listener-podcast relationship. This method traces back to Lazarsfeld and Stanton's (1944) Radio Research Project and Herzog's (1944) soap opera study.

Sample and Data Source

The data source consists of the top 15 podcasts in the mental health and personal development categories on *Apple Podcasts*' Türkiye chart, ranked based on listener reviews. The data were collected in March 2026 using purposive sampling, based on three criteria: a direct focus on mental health, psychology, or psychotherapy; being in the Turkish language; and being actively listed at the time of data collection. Selecting 15 as the cutoff reflects sufficient analytical depth (total n=803) and a significant drop in reviews below this threshold.

The 15 podcasts, along with their total number of comments, are as follows: *Merdiven Altı Terapi* (n=286), *Kendine İyi Davran* (n=225), *Dr. Gulec Radio* (n=80), *Haddini Aşan Yaşam Rehberi* (n=53), *Psikiyatri ve Duvarın Ardı* (n=51), *Terapist Koltuğu* (n=22), *Psikopatika* (n=22), *Mecbur Muyum* (n=15), *Aklımda Kalanlar* (n=12), *Günlüğüm Biliyordu* (n=11), *Podcastlendiniz* (n=10), *Kendime Kulak Verdim* (n=6), *Konuşulacak Çok Şey Var!* (n=4), *Zihin Kodlama Podcast* (n=4), and *Psikolojik Dayanıklılık* (n=2). We pre-screened this pool of 803 comments and reduced it to 454 analytical comments.

We manually collected the comments in March 2026 from the rating and review sections of each podcast on the *Apple Podcasts* app, without automated data collection methods. We collected all comments visible at the time, without applying any date or rating filters. Therefore, this pool reflects the total number of accessible comments, not a sample. The screening process included only Turkish comments and filtered out comments in foreign languages and isolated entries lacking context. The collection process concluded once the categories reached saturation.

Comment distribution across podcasts is uneven. *Merdiven Altı Terapi* (n=286) and *Kendine İyi Davran* (n=225) account for 511 of the 803 comments (63.6%), while the remaining 13 contain far fewer comments. This reflects the typical long-tail distribution of podcast listener bases but raises concerns that these two podcasts' listener profiles and host styles may have shaped the findings. Because the study aimed to capture common discourse patterns rather than individual podcasts, we expanded the sample to fifteen, creating a pool about one and a half times the size of the two dominant podcasts to balance their weights.

To test whether this imbalance meant the findings reflected only these two channels, we split the analytical comments into two groups (the two podcasts with the most comments and the remaining thirteen) and compared them (see Distribution of gratification patterns across podcasts and subcategories). The dominant discourse patterns were not unique to these two channels. They were also consistent with the podcasts that received fewer comments. Nevertheless, the weight of these two podcasts in the dataset limits generalisability.

Coding Framework

The coding framework had a deductive core that we expanded inductively. Drawing on the typology of Katz, Gurevitch, et al. (1973) and Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction, we predefined four categories: cognitive (K1), emotional (K2), social integration (K3), and escape and comfort (K4). The main expansion was in K3: social integration in the typology refers to bonds with real people in one's physical network, but this study extends it through parasocial interaction into a parasocial and social gratification (K3) category that captures the one-way bond with the host. The rationale for this study is threefold. Theoretically, while classical social integration assumes physical presence, the host cannot respond. Parasocial interaction fills this gap. Discursively, referring to the host as a friend expresses both parasocial closeness and the need for social integration, which are inseparable in discourse. Empirically, we systematically observed the two together. Therefore, separating them would fragment the data.

When we applied the four categories, a pattern emerged in which listeners explicitly likened the podcast to professional support, which did not fit into any existing category. We called this therapeutic substitution (K5). This exploratory category emerged inductively in a few comments (n=23) and requires careful interpretation. This category encompasses statements that position the podcast as an alternative to therapy, a solution to access barriers, or a personal healing practice. Since these views are not clearly distinct from one another, K5 has not been subdivided into subcategories. While the first four categories contain thirteen subcategories, K5 stands alone. We grouped comments outside the framework under 'Out of Scope' (OS) with four subheadings (criticism, suggestions and personal narratives, pure praise or thanks, and emojis, meaningless text, and technical enquiries) and excluded them from the findings. *Table 1* lists all categories and definitions.

Table 1. Coding framework: Main categories, subcategories, and definitions

Code	Subcategory	Definition
K1. Cognitive gratification		
K1.1	Knowledge acquisition	Learning concrete psychological knowledge, techniques, or mechanisms
K1.2	Awareness and naming	Gaining insight or finding a conceptual counterpart for a situation previously unable to be defined
K1.3	Reframing	Gaining a different perspective on a situation
K2. Emotional gratification		
K2.1	Emotional release	Crying, tears, emotional release
K2.2	Relief	Feeling good after listening, feeling lighter, peace
K2.3	Coping	Emotional support during difficult times

Code	Subcategory	Definition
K2.4	Hope and meaning	Reduction in helplessness or meaninglessness, hope for the future
K3. Parasocial and social gratification		
K3.1	Sense of recognition	The feeling that the host understands the listener personally
K3.2	Friendship	A sense of personal closeness, affection, and friendship toward the host
K3.3	Not feeling alone	Feeling the presence of others who are going through the same experience
K3.4	Trust and loyalty	Long-term commitment to the host
K4. Escape and comfort		
K4.1	Ritualised escape	Listening as a routine (sleep, walking, commute)
K4.2	Instrumental escape	Conscious listening for stress management
K5. Therapeutic substitution		
K5	Therapeutic substitution (single category)	Positioning the podcast in comparison to professional mental health support: as an alternative to therapy, a compensation for barriers to access, a complement to treatment, or a personal healing practice
OS. Out of scope (category outside the analytical framework)		
OS1	Criticism	Disapproval regarding content, host, style, or technical and format issues
OS2	Suggestions and personal narratives	Suggestions for new episodes or topics, personal stories, questions, or comments
OS3	Pure praise or thanks	A brief expression of praise or thanks
OS4	Emojis, meaningless text, and technical enquiries	Short content that does not serve a therapeutic function, emojis, nonsensical text, or technical questions regarding episode frequency, audio, and the platform

Table 1 formed the basis for coding by combining the four categories of deductive gratification with the category of therapeutic substitution (K5), which emerged through induction. Each category, along with its subcodes and functional definitions, provided coders with a shared reference point.

Data analysis

The analysis used thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), treating each comment as a unit. Each comment was coded with a primary code (covering both the title and body) and, where necessary, secondary codes, as shown in *Table 1*. We applied no hierarchy of importance and coded only expressed functions. An expressed function received only one primary code. When multiple functions were present, two criteria were applied: the semantic centre of gravity of the comment (the function around which the comment

was structured) and its scope (the function constituting the main part of the comment received the primary code, while the transient one received the secondary code). When the criteria conflicted, the centre of gravity was determined by consensus. A recurring decision concerned K3.1 and K3.2, which frequently appeared together. The primary code followed what the comment was organised around, with recognition (K3.1) where the listener located their experience in what the host said, and friendship (K3.2) where the listener addressed the host as a present companion. Expressions of affection appeared in both and were therefore not treated as decisive on their own.

Pre-coding excluded 349 of the 803 comments (43.5%) that could not be placed into the classic gratification categories. These were grouped under 'Out of Scope' (OS). The remaining 454 comments (56.5%) constituted the study's analytical universe. Unless otherwise specified, all percentages in this study are based on these 454 comments.

Two researchers experienced in qualitative content analysis conducted coding in two phases. In the first phase, the researchers pre-coded comments to assess whether each one carried a gratification function that fit the analytical framework. We tested reliability by independently coding a subsample of 80 comments (approximately 10% of the data). Inter-coder agreement, calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960), was $\kappa = 0.87$. Disagreements were resolved by consensus. We then excluded 349 comments, leaving 454 analytical comments.

In the second phase, we coded the 454 analytical comments according to *Table 1*. A 50-comment subsample was coded a second time independently, yielding values of $\kappa = 0.83$ (primary) and $\kappa = 0.81$ (secondary). According to Landis and Koch's (1977) classification, a Kappa value of 0.81 or higher indicates high agreement (Neuendorf, 2017), and all three values (0.87 for screening, 0.83 for primary, and 0.81 for secondary) exceed this threshold. We retained the first coding as the basis for the findings. We calculated codes and frequencies manually in a spreadsheet.

The design is qualitative. The numbers describe the visibility and relative weight of patterns, not inferential statistics. Frequencies serve a descriptive mapping function and do not claim population generalisation or hypothesis testing. Significance tests were not applied, and proportions based on small numbers should be interpreted as qualitative trends.

Ethical considerations

This study utilised publicly available listener comments from *Apple Podcasts*. No users were contacted, no personal information was collected, and the data was anonymised. In quotations, the researcher used anonymous codes (e.g., D-1112) in place of usernames. Although ethical approval requirements for netnographic research using publicly available data vary by institution, this study adhered to Kozinets' (2015, 2020) netnographic ethical principles.

Findings

Distribution of gratification patterns across podcasts and subcategories

The findings begin with the distribution across podcasts and subcategories and address the concern raised in the Sample and data source section that the concentration of comments in two podcasts might limit the findings to these two channels. We divided analytical comments into the two most popular podcasts (Top 2, n=305) and the remaining thirteen (Other 13, n=149). Because the podcasts with fewer comments could not reveal a pattern on their own, we evaluated the latter group as a whole. *Figure 1* shows the full distribution of subcategories, while *Table 2* presents the intergroup comparison.

Figure 1. Podcast and subcategory frequency matrix (n=454). Cell colour intensity reflects the number of comments, and each cell shows the absolute frequency. The horizontal line separates the two podcasts with the most comments (Merdiven Altı Terapi, Kendine İyi Davran) from the remaining thirteen podcast groups.

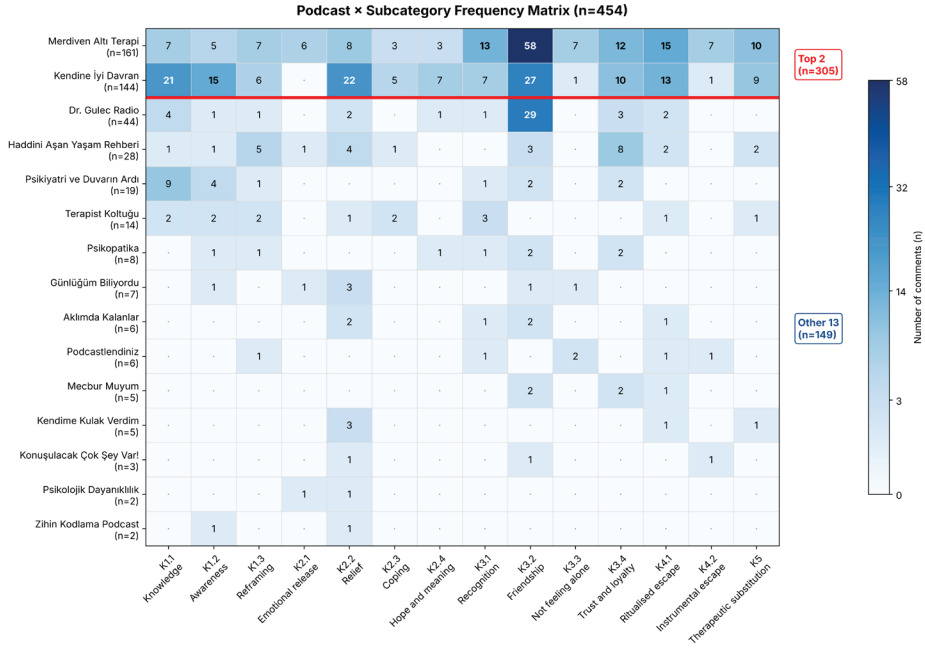


Table 2. Distribution of gratification categories by group: Top 2 vs Other 13 vs Overall

Code	Category	Top 2 (n=305)	Other 13 (n=149)	Overall (n=454)
K1	Cognitive gratification (total)	61 (20.0%)	38 (25.5%)	99 (21.8%)
K1.1	Knowledge acquisition	28 (9.2%)	16 (10.7%)	44 (9.7%)
K1.2	Awareness and naming	20 (6.6%)	11 (7.4%)	31 (6.8%)

Code	Category	Top 2 (n=305)	Other 13 (n=149)	Overall (n=454)
K1.3	Reframing	13 (4.3%)	11 (7.4%)	24 (5.3%)
K2	Emotional gratification (total)	54 (17.7%)	26 (17.4%)	80 (17.6%)
K2.1	Emotional release	6 (2.0%)	3 (2.0%)	9 (2.0%)
K2.2	Relief	30 (9.8%)	18 (12.1%)	48 (10.6%)
K2.3	Coping	8 (2.6%)	3 (2.0%)	11 (2.4%)
K2.4	Hope and meaning	10 (3.3%)	2 (1.3%)	12 (2.6%)
K3	Parasocial and social gratification (total)	135 (44.3%)	70 (47.0%)	205 (45.2%)
K3.1	Sense of recognition	20 (6.6%)	8 (5.4%)	28 (6.2%)
K3.2	Friendship	85 (27.9%)	42 (28.2%)	127 (28.0%)
K3.3	Not feeling alone	8 (2.6%)	3 (2.0%)	11 (2.4%)
K3.4	Trust and loyalty	22 (7.2%)	17 (11.4%)	39 (8.6%)
K4	Escape and comfort (total)	36 (11.8%)	11 (7.4%)	47 (10.4%)
K4.1	Ritualised escape	28 (9.2%)	9 (6.0%)	37 (8.1%)
K4.2	Instrumental escape	8 (2.6%)	2 (1.3%)	10 (2.2%)
K5	Therapeutic substitution gratification	19 (6.2%)	4 (2.7%)	23 (5.1%)
	Total	**305 (100%)**	**149 (100%)**	**454 (100%)**

Table 2 shows that parasocial and social gratification (K3) are predominant in both groups: 44.3% in the "Top 2" group and 47.0% in the "Other 13" group. These percentages are close to the overall average (45.2%). Friendship (K3.2) is nearly the same across all three groups (27.9%, 28.2%, 28.0%), indicating that friendship-based parasocial bonds are not specific to these two podcast styles but are widespread across the ecosystem. Emotional gratification (K2) is also nearly the same across the three groups (17.7%, 17.4%, 17.6%).

Cognitive gratification (K1) is higher in the Other 13 group (25.5% vs 20.0%), reflecting podcasts hosted by experts such as *Psikiyatri* ve *Duvarın Ardı* (n=19) and *Dr. Gulec Radio* (n=44). Escape and comfort (K4) and therapeutic substitution (K5) are more prevalent in the Top 2 group (K4: 11.8% vs 7.4%, K5: 6.2% vs 2.7%). However, these are based on low frequencies (K5: n=4 in the Other 13) and should be interpreted with caution. This clustering directly addresses concerns about asymmetry: the two most discussed podcasts do not dominate the findings. Dominant patterns are widespread and similar across the sample. The following sections present the detailed distribution of gratification categories, prominent subcategories, and co-occurrence patterns.

Distribution of gratification categories and prominent subcategories

Of the 803 comments collected, 454 (56.5%) fell into one of the five main categories defined in *Table 1*. Unless otherwise noted, all percentages below are based on these 454 analytical comments.

The distribution of main categories reveals a clear hierarchy. Parasocial and social gratification (K3) alone accounts for nearly half of the analytical framework (n=205, 45.2%), followed by cognitive (K1, n=99, 21.8%), emotional (K2, n=80, 17.6%), escape and comfort (K4, n=47, 10.4%), and therapeutic substitution (K5, n=23, 5.1%). *Table 3* summarises this distribution.

Table 3. Distribution of primary gratification categories (n=454)

Code	Main category	n	%
K3	Parasocial and social gratification	205	45.2
K1	Cognitive gratification	99	21.8
K2	Emotional gratification	80	17.6
K4	Escape and comfort	47	10.4
K5	Therapeutic substitution	23	5.1
	Total	**454**	**100.0**

This hierarchy is noteworthy for two reasons. First, K3 alone accounts for nearly half of the framework, suggesting that the listener's relationship with the podcast derives its meaning primarily from the emotional bond formed with the host. Second, the fact that information and entertainment (often emphasised in the classical literature) take a back seat reveals that mental health podcasts create a distinct structure of gratification.

The smallest share is therapeutic substitution, identified through inductive reasoning (K5, n=23, 5.1%). This dimension encompasses comments that compare the podcast to professional support, positioning it at times as a direct substitute for therapy, at times as a solution to access barriers, or as a personal healing practice. Since these views lack clear boundaries and are few in number, K5 has not been subdivided, and the "a complement to treatment" dimension in *Table 1* has no corresponding counterpart in listener discourse.

It's like an antidepressant. A daily dose does me good. (D-1451, K5 + K4.1)

This comment views the podcast as an alternative to therapy, a daily activity similar to taking antidepressants. In some K5 comments, ritualised escape (K4.1, n=4) and friendship (K3.2, n=3) emerged as secondary codes. This trend appears in a small number of examples that link therapeutic positioning to daily consumption and parasocial bonds.

The category takes three further forms in the data. The first equates a listening session with a therapy session.

Exactly like a free thirty-minute therapy session. (D-1178, K5)

The second presents the podcast as compensation for an access barrier that the listener names in financial terms.

I cannot go to a psychologist because I cannot afford it. My dream is to have therapy with you one day if my situation improves. (D-1375, K5)

The third describes listening as a practice the listener has built on their own, in the continued absence of professional support.

I have needed therapy at every stage of my life, but I try to help myself by listening to things like this. (D-1138, K5 + K2.3)

These forms are not equivalent claims. D-1178 treats the episode as a session, whereas D-1375 positions the podcast as a stand-in that the listener would still replace with professional support if circumstances allowed. This is why K5 remains a single category rather than being subdivided.

Findings at the subcategory level provide a more detailed illustration of the main category model. *Table 4* presents the full subcategory distribution and shows that listener gratification is concentrated at both the main category and subcategory levels.

Table 4. Complete distribution of subcategories within the analytical framework (n=454)

Code	Subcategory	n	% within main category	Overall %
K1. Cognitive gratification (n=99, 21.8%)				
K1.1	Knowledge acquisition	44	44.4	9.7
K1.2	Awareness and naming	31	31.3	6.8
K1.3	Reframing	24	24.2	5.3
K2. Emotional gratification (n=80, 17.6%)				
K2.2	Relief	48	60.0	10.6
K2.4	Hope and meaning	12	15.0	2.6
K2.3	Coping	11	13.8	2.4
K2.1	Emotional release	9	11.3	2.0
K3. Parasocial and social gratification (n=205, 45.2%)				
K3.2	Friendship	127	62.0	28.0
K3.4	Trust and loyalty	39	19.0	8.6
K3.1	Sense of recognition	28	13.7	6.2
K3.3	Not feeling alone	11	5.4	2.4
K4. Escape and comfort (n=47, 10.4%)				
K4.1	Ritualised escape	37	78.7	8.1
K4.2	Instrumental escape	10	21.3	2.2

Code	Subcategory	n	% within main category	Overall %
K5. Therapeutic substitution (n=23, 5.1%)				
K5	Therapeutic substitution (single category)	23	100.0	5.1
	Total	**454**	**-**	**100.0**

As shown in *Table 4*, there is a dominant subcategory in each of the first four categories: knowledge acquisition in K1 (K1.1, 44.4%), relief in K2 (K2.2, 60.0%), friendship in K3 (K3.2, 62.0%), and ritualised escape in K4 (K4.1, 78.7%). K5 consists of a single category. The top five subcategories (K3.2, K2.2, K1.1, K3.4, K4.1) account for about two-thirds of all comments (n=295, 65.0%) and show clusters of gratification centred on specific core experience patterns.

The most striking finding here is that K3.2 (Friendship) stands out significantly from all other subcategories with 28.0%. This category encompasses comments in which the listener explicitly positions the host as a friend, older sister, companion, or personal figure, as in the example below.

> *It's like I'm chatting with a friend. The only difference is I can't ask questions in between.* (D-1129, K3.2)

This comment shows that the listener views the host as a personal friend but also recognises that this bond is one-sided ("I can't ask questions"). This situation perfectly illustrates Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial interaction.

Because this subcategory carries the largest share of the framework, its internal texture merits closer reading. Around half of these comments declare the bond without accounting for it, in brief formulations of affection or gratitude for the host's existence, so that the relationship is not something the listener argues for but something the listener treats as already settled. The remaining comments do offer grounds, and they fall into recognisable patterns.

The most frequent is the conversational register, in which the episode is described as an exchange rather than a broadcast, as when a listener reports feeling on every listen as though the two of them were sitting together over coffee (D-1499). A second pattern is shared laughter, where the response is reported as simultaneous: when the host begins laughing at a joke of their own, the listener "starts laughing over here too" (D-1040). A third is the voice itself, named through intonation, emphasis, and breathing, and carried to its limit by a listener who began listening to stop hearing the voice in their own head and reports that "now the voice in my head is hers" (D-1004).

A fourth pattern concerns how listeners name the host. Rather than referring to a presenter or a channel, they address the host directly, most often by first name and otherwise through terms drawn from close everyday relationships, such as 'abla' (older sister) or 'hocam' (teacher). These terms of familiar

address are the point at which the familiar stranger described by Horton and Wohl (1956) becomes observable in listener discourse, since the listener performs the passage from stranger to familiar in the act of naming. The two terms do not carry the same relation. 'Abla' removes distance, as in "you are my own older sister, but I wish you really were my own older sister" (D-1613). At the same time, 'hocam' preserves the expert role and claims closeness within it, and one comment holds both together by addressing the host as *hocam* and adding that she is loved "like an older brother, like a sibling" (D-1293). A smaller group locates the bond in what is absent elsewhere, as with the listener who looks up to people like the host and wishes for "at least one person like you around me" (D-1053).

K3.2 (Friendship) and K3.4 (Trust and Loyalty) together account for 36.6% of the framework. The loyalty dimension is evident in comments indicating that the listener follows the host over the long term and across multiple channels.

Internal distribution of K3 (*Table 4*): K3.2 (Friendship) constitutes approximately two-thirds (62.0%) of K3. K3.4 (Trust and loyalty, 19.0%) represents the long-term loyalty dimension. In contrast, K3.1 (Sense of Recognition, 13.7%) represents the feeling of being personally understood and is the direct equivalent of Horton and Wohl's (1956, p. 215) concept of "distant intimacy" / "distant closeness". K3.3 (Not Feeling Alone, 5.4%) reflects the sense of belonging derived from others who share the same experience. Comments reflecting these are provided below.

It feels like you're listening to what I've been through as you speak. (D-1188, K3.1)

This comment reflects a sense of recognition that arises when the listener finds their own experience in the speaker's words. K3.3 (not feeling alone) expresses a sense of belonging to a shared community of experience. Here, the use of first-person plural forms indicates not merely individual but also social belonging.

Following K3.2, the subsequent subcategories concretely demonstrate emotional and cognitive gratification: K2.2 (Relief, 10.6%), feeling lighter after listening, and K1.1 (Knowledge acquisition, 9.7%), learning concrete psychological information.

Emotional gratification encompasses broader dimensions: emotional release in comments related to crying (K2.1), coping with difficult times through support (K2.3), and hope and meaning derived from the content as inspiration (K2.4).

Under cognitive gratification, K1.2 (Awareness and Naming) includes comments where listeners gain insight and identify a label for an emotion or situation that was previously unnamed. In these comments, a concept from the podcast is often adopted to define themselves. Thus, insight and labelling intertwine under a single subcategory.

K1.3 (Reframing) encompasses comments that indicate a new perspective on an existing topic, distinct from the concrete transfer of information (K1.1).

The fifth category, K4.1 (Ritualised escape, 8.1%), encompasses comments that position the podcast as part of a daily routine. These comments are often intertwined with emotional regulation (K2.2) and involve listening before sleep, while commuting, or while doing household chores.

The second dimension, K4.2 (Instrumental Escape), encompasses purposeful listening aimed at managing a specific negative emotional state. This state is triggered when needed rather than out of habit.

Co-occurrence patterns of gratification categories

The most intuitive question regarding co-occurrence is which two categories appear together most frequently. At least one secondary code was assigned in 215 of the 454 comments (47.4%), indicating that listener discourse cannot be reduced to a single function. *Table 5* ranks the most frequently co-coded category pairs, focusing on how often the two appear together rather than which is primary. The top five pairs are shown. Pairs were counted between the primary and the secondary code of each comment.

Table 5. Most frequently co-coded subcategory pairs (top five, in descending order)

Co-coded pair	Co-coded n	Gratification relationship
K3.2 and K3.4	17	Friendship, trust, and loyalty
K3.2 and K4.1	17	Friendship and ritualised escape
K2.2 and K3.2	11	Relief and friendship
K2.2 and K4.1	10	Relief through ritualised escape
K3.1 and K3.2	8	A sense of recognition and friendship

The five pairs in *Table 5* demonstrate that gratification operates within an interconnected ecosystem. K3.2 (Friendship) appears in four of the five pairs and is coded alongside trust and loyalty (K3.4), ritualised escape (K4.1), relief (K2.2), and a sense of recognition (K3.1). The other most frequently occurring pair, K4.1 and K2.2, is strongly linked to each other and to friendship. Thus, friendship and emotional relief form the foundation for other forms of gratification.

The central position of K3.2 (Friendship) is theoretically significant: listeners describe many of their relationships with the podcast (trust, routine, relief, feeling understood) through the personal bond of friendship, placing it at the centre of listener discourse. Tukachinsky and Stever's (2019) developmental model, in which each stage builds upon the previous one, is qualitatively reflected in these simultaneities.

Similarly, K2.2 (Relief) is frequently coded alongside friendship and ritualised escape. This forms a secondary foundational structure in which daily rou-

tine and closeness to the host intertwine with relief. Thus, cognitive, emotional, parasocial, and escape-based gratifications are not sharply distinguished but form a mutually reinforcing whole.

Another overlap is observed between therapeutic substitution (K5) and ritualised escape (K4.1): some K5 comments (n=4) were also coded as K4.1. Although this falls below the threshold value in *Table 5*, it is theoretically significant, as the same listener treats the daily routine as a therapeutic substitute, which concretely exemplifies Couldry and Hepp's (2017) concept of mediatisation and the "mediated care" discussed in the Mental health content section.

At the qualitative level, the parasocial and social gratification pattern is not unique to podcasts with a high number of comments. While it stands out distinctly in *Merdiven Altı Terapi* and *Kendine İyi Davran* (which constitute the majority of the comment pool), the same friendship (K3.2) pattern is also observed in podcasts with relatively few comments. Consistent with the podcast-level comparison presented in the Distribution of gratification patterns across podcasts and subcategories section, this demonstrates that dominant gratification patterns cannot be reduced to a single podcast or host style.

In summary, listener gratification operates not as isolated categories but within an ecosystem organised around friendship (K3.2) and emotional relief (K2.2). The overlap of K5 with other forms of gratification suggests that the classic four-gratification framework needs to be expanded to explain mental health podcast applications in the Turkish context.

For completeness, the 349 comments (43.5%) outside the framework were categorised into four out-of-scope (OS) subcategories (*Table 6*). The prevalence of pure praise and gratitude (OS3) reflects the *Apple Podcasts* interface's encouragement of brief positive comments. In contrast, the presence of critical comments (OS1) indicates that listener discourse encompasses not only positive parasocial bonds but also a critical distance.

Table 6. Distribution of comments outside the analytical framework (n=349)

Code	Subcategory	n	Overall %
OS1	Criticism	85	10.6
OS2	Suggestions and personal narratives	88	11.0
OS3	Pure praise or thanks	90	11.2
OS4	Emojis, meaningless text, and technical enquiries	86	10.7
Total		349	43.5

While this suggests that roughly half of the comments do not serve a direct gratification function and partly reflect platform engagement, critical comments reveal that the discourse is not limited to one-sided admiration. Overall, parasocial and social gratification (particularly friendship) are central to the listener experience in mental health podcasts. Cognitive and emotional

gratification complement this relational axis, while therapeutic substitution constitutes a limited yet noteworthy trend. In the next section, we examine these patterns in light of the theoretical framework.

Discussion

This study examined 803 comments on mental health podcasts in Türkiye using a netnographic approach and coded 454 of them within the frameworks of 'uses and gratifications' and 'parasocial interaction.' The findings address three questions. First, gratifications follow a hierarchical structure: parasocial and social gratifications (K3, 45.2%) account for nearly half, followed by cognitive (21.8%), emotional (17.6%), escape and comfort (10.4%), and inductive therapeutic substitution (5.1%). Thus, the relational dimension outpaces information and entertainment. Second, parasocial interaction extends across four sub-dimensions. Friendship is the largest (28.0%). Third, 5.1% of the comments compared the podcast to professional support.

The most prominent pattern is the dominance of parasocial and social gratification. That social integration gratification (typically considered secondary in the classical literature) rises to the top here supports Schlütz and Hedder's (2021) finding that audio media fosters intimate parasocial relationships in the Turkish context. Friendship (K3.2), at 28.0%, aligns with Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of the "familiar stranger" in digital audio media. Synchronicity analysis confirms this: the secondary code appeared in 47.4% of the comments, and K3.2 emerged in four out of the top five pairs. This demonstrates that the bond of friendship is central and intertwined with other forms of gratification.

This pattern converges with Özkan Sev and Vural (2024) from the opposite direction. Their listeners, asked directly, identified the host's mode of address and style as what mattered most, and the study framed the resulting bond as an illusion of friendship. The present data show the same relation as listeners state it without being asked, distributed across recognition (K3.1) and friendship (K3.2), and give that framing an empirical weight of 28.0%. The divergence lies elsewhere. In the classical typology, social integrative gratification is one need among several rather than the leading one, whereas here it outranks the cognitive and emotional categories combined. Three conditions plausibly account for this. The subject matter is mental health, which makes the relational dimension part of what is sought rather than a by-product of it. The Turkish context attaches stigma to disclosure, so a mediated relationship carries what a face-to-face one may not. The genre of the data also matters, since a review is written to the host and therefore invites relational language, as discussed in the Limitations and future research section.

The three conditions above concern the topic, context, and genre of the data. A fourth concerns the medium. Zuraikat (2020) locates the parasocial ca-

pacity of podcasting in its conversational register and its availability during ordinary activities, and Scherer and Cohen (2025) specify the mechanism, reporting that mobility strengthens parasocial relationships through narrative transportation and that the effect grows as multitasking increases. This also distinguishes podcasting from other digital platforms. No image carries the relationship, so the voice does; listening is typically solitary, sustained, and episodic rather than glanced at in a feed. The patterns described in the Distribution of gratification categories and prominent subcategories section correspond to these conditions point by point. Listeners name intonation, emphasis, and breathing as grounds for the bond; they report laughing at the same moment as the host, and they name the host as they would name someone in their life. The comment in which a listener reports that the host's voice has replaced the voice in their head is the limit case of a medium whose only channel is the voice.

Two comparisons locate this result. Maloney Yorganci and McMurtry (2025) identify seven features through which podcast hosts are perceived as authentic. Three of these, immediacy, ordinariness, and spontaneity, recur here. Three others, freedom, imperfection, and confession, have no counterpart in this data, which is consistent with content in which the host holds an expert role that imperfection would undermine rather than humanise. Two features prominent here are absent from their account, namely the voice itself and the terms of familiar address, and the coexistence of 'abla' and 'hocam' indicates that closeness in this setting is claimed within the expert relation rather than in place of it. The second comparison is closer to home. Özkök Şişman and Tosun (2022) report four dimensions of podcast gratification among Turkish listeners, and none of them is relational. Taken together, these comparisons indicate that the relational dimension is not a general property of podcast listening but emerges where the content is personal and the listener's need is unmet elsewhere. For digital media studies, this suggests that the gratification a platform affords cannot be read from the platform alone.

Beyond the four classic categories, the therapeutic substitution (K5) pattern, which emerged inductively in a few comments (n=23), framed the podcast as an alternative to therapy, a compensation for access barriers, or a personal healing practice. This links to Lupton's (2018) findings on digital self-care and to Çebi Karaaslan et al. (2024) on structural barriers to accessing mental health services in Türkiye. The secondary codes K4.1 (n=4) and K3.2 (n=3) within K5 are based on very few examples. Since K5 constitutes only 5.1% of the framework, it should be treated as an exploratory model rather than an independent category and tested with larger datasets.

This is where the study's theoretical contribution lies. K3 is not an additional need placed alongside the classical four. In Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973), the social integrative need is met through ties with family, friends, and the wider world, that is, through reciprocal relationships. In the present data, it is met through a one-sided relationship with a host the listener has never met, and this pattern holds across all four sub-dimensions. What the frame-

work requires here is therefore not a new category but the redefinition of an existing one for content whose relationship with its audience is the material itself. K5 marks the outer edge of the same move, where that relationship is measured against professional support. The proposal to extend the uses and gratifications framework to digital audio media should be read in this specific context.

Future research could deepen these findings through cross-platform designs, listener interviews, and analyses of host style. Practically, mental health professionals can assess podcast consumption as part of a client's media practices, and content creators can shape their content while considering the responsibility that comes with the parasocial bond formed with listeners.

Limitations and Future Research

The main limitations are as follows. First, the data is limited to *Apple Podcasts*, and this platform's *iOS* base may skew the sample toward higher income and education levels. Second, the commenters do not represent the entire listener base. Third, two podcasts account for 63.6% of the pool. This limits generalisability but is partially mitigated by the goal of capturing collective discourse and the sample size of fifteen podcasts. The comparison in the Findings section (*Figure 1*, *Table 2*) empirically assessed this and showed that dominant patterns, particularly friendship, were largely consistent between the Top 2 and Other 13 groups. Therefore, the findings cannot be reduced to the style of these two podcasts. Fourth, 349 of the 803 comments fell outside the analytical framework, comprising criticism (n=85), suggestions and personal narratives (n=88), pure praise or thanks (n=90), and emojis, meaningless text, and technical enquiries (n=86). Two examples indicate what falls away. "The constant laughing mode kills both humour and seriousness. I got bored." (D-1126) evaluates the host but names no gratification, and "I loved it in every way, thank you." (D-1119) is positive but names none either. Exclusion therefore operates at both ends, although its consequence is asymmetric. Contentless praise has counterparts within the framework, whereas dissatisfaction has no route into it, since the categories record functions obtained rather than functions withheld. The distribution reported here is accordingly a distribution within gratification-expressing discourse rather than within listener discourse as a whole. A related constraint follows from the genre of the data noted in the discussion, since a review is addressed to the host and may itself encourage relational language. Neither constraint can be resolved within this design, and both point to data gathered outside a review setting. Frequencies are descriptive in nature and do not imply generalisability.

Conclusion

This study asked what listeners of mental health podcasts in Türkiye seek and

what they obtain, and the answer is a relationship. Parasocial and social gratification accounts for 45.2% of the analytical framework, more than the cognitive and emotional categories combined, and friendship alone accounts for 28.0%, the largest subcategory in the study. Where listeners give grounds for the bond, four recur. They name the episode's conversational register, laughing at the same moment as the host, the voice with its intonation and breathing, and the terms they use to address the host, which are the terms they use for people in their own lives. Around half provide no grounds at all.

Two consequences follow. A podcast has no image, so the voice alone carries the bond. Here the relationship is not one gratification among others but the ground the others rest on. This is why the social integrative category of classical typology had to be widened. Gratification is therefore not a fixed property of a platform. It is produced at the meeting of a medium, a subject matter, and a need that has gone unmet elsewhere. Other studies of podcast listening treat the relationship as one motive among many. When the content is personal, it becomes the motive that organises the rest.

This study advances therapeutic substitution most tentatively. It was not part of the initial framework. It emerged inductively from the data, appearing in twenty-three comments in three forms ranging from equating an episode with a therapy session to describing a recovery practice built alone in the absence of professional support. The number is small, and the pattern should be reassessed against the growing body of work on podcast-based mental health intervention rather than settled here. The finding shows the question is worth asking, and answering it will require larger and more varied data than a single platform can provide.

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Ethics committee approval: There is no need for ethics committee approval.
Conflict of interest: There are no conflicts of interest to declare.
Financial support: No funding was received for this study.

Etik kurul onayı: Etik kurul onayına ihtiyaç bulunmamaktadır.
Çıkar çatışması: Çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.
Finansal destek: Finansal destek bulunmamaktadır.